

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet
Date: 05 April 2021
Subject: Customer and Partnerships Portfolio
Portfolio Holder: Councillor Sam Kane

Recommending:

That the report of the Customer and Partnerships Portfolio Holder be noted.

In my update to you this Council I would like to focus on the recent work of the Revenues and Benefits team whose work often goes unseen supporting thousands of our residents and businesses with their bills and benefit claims. The team has also continued to provide multiple Covid-related support packages to residents and businesses, all within existing resources. I would like to thank the team for their efforts this year in delivering on these challenges.

At the last Council meeting the Council's budget and Council Tax amounts were set. Work then transfers to the Revenues and Benefit teams to update the ICT systems and then produce the necessary Council Tax bills, along with Business Rates bills and Local Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit notifications for the coming year. As Members will appreciate this is a technical exercise that requires extensive logistical planning and delivery in a matter of a few weeks. I am pleased to inform Members that the exercise was again delivered on time and I have laid out below the numbers involved:

Council Tax debit raised 2022/23	£114,435,092
Council Tax bills posted	53,009
Council Tax e-bills	6,320
Business Rates debit raised 2022/23	£34,607,153
Business Rates bills posted	4,356
Business Rates e-bills	108
Benefit notification letters sent	7,305

I would also like to inform Members of the number of phone calls that the Revenues and Benefits team have taken over the period following the annual bills and notifications were sent out. This fell from 3,753 in March 2021 to 2,172 in March 2022, a fall of 42% which is a great result. The number of people actually needing to contact the team following receipt of their bills has been attributed to improved signposting to the website for information and better co-ordination of the delivery of Council Tax Bills and Benefit notification letters to claimants.

Of the calls that the team received a number related to the Government's £150 Council Tax Energy Rebate. An explanatory form provided by Government was

issued with all bills. To provide some immediate relief to rising energy costs, while targeting those most likely to require support, Councils including EFDC will provide a £150 one-off payment to council taxpayers for every household that occupy a property which meets certain criteria on **1 April 2022** the main ones being:

- It is valued in council tax bands **A – D**.
- It is **someone's sole or main residence** (therefore **won't** be paid for empty properties or second homes);

How will the Rebate be paid?

The Revenues and Benefits team will again be administering this scheme. For clarification the Rebate is not applied as a discount to people's Council Tax bills – it is a direct payment to eligible recipients (Council Tax data is being used as the vehicle to direct the payments)

The Rebates will be paid as soon as possible from April 2022.

a) Where we hold live direct debit instructions for a council taxpayer of an eligible household

Automatic payment (BACS) will be made to council taxpayers of eligible households. These will be paid in April 2022.

b) Where we do not hold direct debit instructions

We will contact these households as early as possible in April 2022 to make them aware of the scheme and invite them to make a claim and payment will be arranged via BACS or alternative methods where bank accounts are not held. Such payments need to have been made by 30th September 2022.

Discretionary scheme - £377,550

Councils can determine locally how best to make use of this funding to provide payments to **other** households who are energy bill payers but not covered by the Council Tax Rebate. This could include households living in property valued in bands E – H that are on income related benefits or those where the energy bills payers are not liable for council tax. Support from the Discretionary Fund should consist of no more than £150 per household. We will be bringing a discretionary scheme forward in early financial year 2022/23 to provide guidelines on how we allocate the funds available.

Parking

All Epping Forest Council Car Parks have been awarded with Park Mark national safety award. EFDC car parks have passed rigorous risk assessments conducted by the police and the British Parking Association. The assessments include management and maintenance of the facility, ensuring that there are appropriate levels of lighting, surveillance, signage and cleanliness. These criteria are known to reduce the opportunity for crime and create a safer environment for all car park users.

EFDC have partnered with leading EV charge point supplier, InstaVolt, for the first public charging points in an EFDC operated public car park. The charging points have been successfully installed in Oakwood Hill East Car Park, pending UKPN activation of the units. The chargers will go live 28th March 2022.

New off-street car parking tariffs will be implemented from Monday 4th April 2022. A formal Notice of Variation has been given, with advertisement in the local paper and notices put up in car parks. System upgrades and changes to car park signs are ready and will be updated from Monday 4th April 2022.